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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BELGRADE 000116

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: SERBIA: ALMOST 700 CONFIRMED CASES OF H1N1 INFLUENZA; LOW  
DEMAND FOR VACCINE

REF: 09 BELGRADE 1332

SUMMARY

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[11](#). (SBU) The number of cases and deaths attributed to H1N1 in Serbia continues to climb. While the GoS continues to publicize the dangers of the virus and the need for vaccination, many in the Serbian public remain skeptical. As a result of the low demand for vaccinations, Serbia has cut the number of vaccines on order. Remaining stockpiles of vaccine should be adequate for the immediate future, however it is unlikely that public perception will shift, and we expect few Serbians will ultimately choose to be vaccinated. End Summary.

CURRENT STATISTICS

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[12](#). (U) As of January 18, according to the Health Ministry, Serbia has confirmed 689 cases of H1N1, and attributed 75 deaths to the virus. Currently 269 people are hospitalized with flu-like symptoms. These recent numbers show a significant increase in both the number of confirmed cases and deaths attributed to the virus since November 2009, when the GOS formally declared an epidemic. At that time, 258 cases had been confirmed, and nine deaths attributed to H1N1.

POOR TURNOUT FOR VACCINE

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[13](#). (U) The first shipments of vaccine from the Swiss pharmaceutical company Novartis began arriving in late November 2009, and vaccination of high-risk populations began December 17, [12](#)2009. Since this time, according to press reports quoting Health Minister Tomica Milosavljevic, Serbia has received 855,700 doses of the vaccine, and vaccinated 135,583 persons - approximately 1.7% of the Serbian population. The government working group formed to monitor the spread of the H1N1 virus had previously stated that a reasonable target for vaccination in Serbia would be 1.5 million people or 20% of the population. Part of the reason for the low

turnout can be attributed to the public's skepticism of the safety and necessity for the vaccine. Additionally, the public is wary of the domestic agent for the Novartis vaccines, Jugohemija, whose owner Miroslav Miskovic is a controversial Serbian tycoon. The GoS has tried to publicize the safety and benefits of being vaccinated by playing up the vaccination of government leaders, and extending the school holidays as a preventive measure.

DECREASE IN VACCINE ORDER; NO IMPACT ON AVAILABILITY

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14. (U) On January 13, the GoS decided to suspend until further notice the purchase of additional H1N1 doses. According to local press reports, the decision was made in consultation with the Health Ministry and the working group monitoring the virus in Serbia. The GoS will reevaluate the situation on February 20, at which time it will decide whether to continue procuring additional doses. Due to the limited current demand for the vaccine, the Health Ministry expects the remaining stockpile should be adequate to cover those wishing to be vaccinated.

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POTENTIAL ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES OF SUSPENDING VACCINE ORDER

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15. (U) Initial press reports, quoting Svetlana Vukajlovic, the Director of the Republic Institute for Health Insurance (RZZO), explained the GoS would not incur any financial losses if a portion of the three million dose vaccine order was canceled. Vukajlovic said that according to an oral agreement, Jugohemija would absorb any financial consequences. Jugohemija disputed this claim in a press statement, stating that any changes to the contract could have "serious financial consequences for the company and for the consumers in Serbia."

COMMENT

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16. (SBU) The GoS continues its effort to convince people of the need for vaccination. Strong public skepticism coupled with persistent media reports questioning the need for vaccination have resulted in a disappointing turn-out for the vaccine and may leave the GoS with a hefty bill for the unused portion. However, as the number of deaths attributed to H1N1 continues to rise, the GoS may find it necessary to take stronger measures to stop the spread of the disease. End Comment.

WARLICK